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WHO'S IN CHARGE OF THE CHURCH?

1 Timothy 3:1 & other Scriptures

By

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Lesson 8

Who's In Charge Of The Church? 1 Timothy 3:1 & other Scriptures

"Who's in charge of the church?" Most American Christians would answer, "The pastor is." And many American pastors are burning out or dropping out because they're overwhelmed with the responsibility of running the church (in many cases, the church is running them!). They feel like a chipmunk running inside the spinning cage-wheel, getting nowhere except exhausted. As a church grows, the pastor's role often changes imperceptibly into a business manager rather than a pastor-teacher. To prevent these problems, we need to answer from the Bible, "Who is in charge of the church?"

Furthermore, most American churches are run like American government. Democracy is assumed. Members have a vote and they use that vote to exercise control. If they don't like the way the pastor or the church board is doing things, they organize a movement to vote them out of office. That's the American way! But it's not necessarily the biblical way. We need to answer clearly from the Bible, "Who is in charge of the church?" so that we don't just do things the American way.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Paul enumerates for Timothy the qualifications of those who serve as overseers (or elders) and deacons in the local church. Before we examine these qualifications (in future messages), I want to take this message to explain some basics about church government. Even though we are affiliated with the Conservative Baptist Association, we have people here from a number of different church backgrounds. Many churches are governed on patterns stemming more from tradition and culture than from biblical principles. So among us we probably have different ideas about church government, including the role and function of the pastor, the elders, and deacons. I want to develop the idea that ...

Christ exercises headship over His church through
spiritually mature elders who shepherd His flock.

1. The basic principle of church government is that Jesus Christ is the Head of His church.

Who is in charge of the church? Jesus Christ is! It is *His* church; He bought it with His blood. The local church does not belong to the pastor, to the elders, or to the congregation. It belongs to Jesus Christ who alone is the Head (see Eph. 1:20-23). No one dare proclaim, "This is *my* church!" It doesn't belong to any of us. It belongs to Christ the Lord. Never in the New Testament are the leaders of the local church referred to as "head" of the church. Neither is the church viewed as a democratic organization, where the members are free to vote their own minds on issues. The key question in church government is not, "What is the mind of the members?" but, "What is the mind of Christ?"

The church is a living organism, with Jesus Christ as the living Head. The church is not to be organized as a corporation, with the pastor and elder board as the directors and the congregation as shareholders! Webster defines an organization as "an administrative and functional structure." He defines an organism as "an individual constituted to carry on the activities of life by means of organs separate in function but mutually dependent." The church is the latter. While an organism is organized, it is more: it is living, responsive to the living Head. The church is a living organism in which every member is to be submissive and responsive to the Head and in mutual dependence and interaction with the other members so that the will of the Head may be carried out in a harmonious corporate manner.

So the main function of church government is to allow Christ to exercise His headship over His church. Having that view of church government results in an entirely different way of conducting church business. If you view the church as a democratic organization where every member has a right to vote, you're into church politics. Shortly after I came here, I had lunch with a denominational executive who advised me, "You've got to build your power base as a new pastor in a church." I didn't reply, but I thought to myself, "I'm sorry, but I'm not into building a power base." If you operate that way, you're simply trying to manage and manipulate a bunch of self-willed people expressing their wishes through majority rule. But if the members are living daily in sub-

mission to the living Head and seeking to obey His Word, then when they come together to take care of business, they are denying self and reverently seeking what the Lord is saying to His church corporately. That's an entirely different thing than church politics!

To implement this principle, Scripture teaches that ...

2. Christ exercises His headship through spiritually mature elders.

There are two main terms used interchangeably in the New Testament to describe church leaders: "elders" and "overseers" (Titus 1:5, 7; Acts 20:17, 28). "*Elders*" (Greek, *presbyteros*; see also 1 Pet. 5:1-4) looks at the man himself. It refers to a man of maturity, not necessarily in years, but in spiritual discernment. While the Bible doesn't put any age requirement on the office, I would say that an elder under 30 should be an exception (Jesus began His ministry around that age). Once in a while you see a Spurgeon come along, who began pastoring at 17 and was a godly example and a superb Bible expositor from the start. But that is rare. "*Overseers*" (Greek, *episkopos*; 1 Tim. 3:1-2) looks at the nature of the work. It refers to men who superintend, watch over, or guard the local church. This term points to a man who is spiritually mature enough to discern spiritual dangers and to guard and guide the flock into spiritual growth.

A third word, "*pastor*" (= "shepherd"), is used in noun form only once for church leaders (Eph. 4:11), where Paul says that God has gifted some as pastors and teachers, the two concepts being tied together. The verb is used of church leaders in several places (John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). In 1 Peter 2:24, Jesus is called the Shepherd (Pastor) and Guardian (Overseer) of our souls. Thus human pastors and overseers work under and are accountable to the Lord Jesus, the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4). The word "*pastor*" looks at the work from the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep.

A fourth word (Greek, *prohistemi*, from a compound, "to stand before or first") means to lead or have charge over (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17; Rom. 12:8). A fifth word (Greek, *hegeomai*, we get our "hegemony" from it) means to lead or rule (Heb. 13:7, 17,

24; Luke 22:26). While it involves authority (Heb. 13:17), it also requires servanthood (Luke 22:26).

The point of these various terms is that there is to be a designated body of leaders in the local church. The Bible prescribes several things concerning these leaders:

A. Elders should be men, not women.

As we saw last week (1 Tim. 2:11-15), leadership in the local church is to be male, not female, in order to preserve God's order instituted in creation, but violated in the fall. Also, every time elders are mentioned in the New Testament, they are men, not women. The qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4) also make it plain that this office is for men ("husband of one wife"). This means that the elder who is supported as the teaching pastor (1 Tim. 5:17) must be a man. Women may serve on the staff of a local church as pastors and teachers of other women (Titus 2:2), but not over men.

B. Elders should be spiritually mature men.

This was already indicated in the terms used for the office: elder, overseer, shepherd, and leader. But it's also spelled out in the list of qualifications. We will examine these more carefully (next time), but for now please note that as a whole the list consists of qualities that reflect spiritual and emotional maturity. "Above reproach" heads both lists (1 Tim. 3:2 & Titus 1:5) as a comprehensive term looking at his integrity and reputation. Of the other qualities listed, only one has to do with ability or giftedness ("able to teach"). The others have to do with his home life and personal ethics, especially qualities that can be readily observed.

C. Elders should be a plurality.

The term is always used in the plural with regard to a single local church (see Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5). It may be that one elder had oversight of a single house church. It also may be that one elder, especially the one supported to preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17-18) will be looked to as the leader among the elders, as Peter was among the apostles and as James was among the elders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:2-21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9). But the church in a city was viewed as a unit over which there were several elders.

There is wisdom in many counselors (Prov. 11:14) and there is wisdom in sharing the responsibility and authority in the church, so that no single person will dominate without accountability. The only one-man ruler in the New Testament is Diotrephes, whom the Apostle John castigates because “he loves to be first” and he exercised heavy-handed authority by himself (3 John 9-10). The elders need to be subject to Christ through apostolic authority (now, the New Testament; Diotrephes was not). From that base, they can then relate to one another in harmony as a practical expression of the Body of Christ.

Thus the elders should be spiritually mature men, subject to Christ as Head of His church. How are the elders selected?

D. Elders are selected by God and recognized by the church.

As already mentioned, the church is not a democracy. That may sound un-American, but remember, not everything that is American is biblical. Democracy may be a great way to run our country, but it’s a lousy way to run the church. The church is a living organism under the headship of Jesus Christ, subject to His Word. As such, the church must be living in submission to Christ as it seeks to discern His mind in line with the requirements of His Word. That’s a lot different than just taking a vote and following the majority opinion!

Acts 20:28 states how a man becomes an elder or overseer: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” How does this happen? Originally, it was by apostolic appointment (see Acts 14:23). Paul didn’t hold elections; he appointed elders. Later he had his delegates, Timothy and Titus, appoint elders (Titus 1:5). In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, we have the Holy Spirit-inspired qualifications which we must look for in those who are to be elders. It is the responsibility of the church to seek the Lord (Paul fasted and prayed, Acts 14:23) to discern which men meet those qualifications and are willing to devote themselves to that ministry, and to recognize them as elders.

Thus rather than “voting” for elders at our annual meeting, we should view it as confirming these men as meeting the biblical

qualifications. To that end we have elder candidates fill out an extensive personal questionnaire to learn about their walk with God, their home life, etc. The nominating committee interviews each candidate, going over these questions. Also, the committee welcomes any input from the congregation. We want men in office who are examples of godliness.

There are no stipulations in the New Testament as to the number of elders per church. That should be determined by the number of qualified men and the need for shepherding in the church. It is almost impossible for one man to shepherd more than 20 families, so the larger the church, the more elders will be needed.

Although there is no concept in the New Testament of elders serving a set "term" of office, it is not a bad idea to have a fixed term so that an elder can be reviewed by the congregation and so that he can determine whether to continue serving or to take some time off. It's a demanding ministry, and men who work in an outside job can't always continue in it year in and year out. Also, family pressures change with the ages of a man's children, and so it seems wise to allow him to limit his commitment or renew it as his personal circumstances dictate. I understand that our new church constitution will allow for the elders serving terms, as is currently the case for our deacons.

Thus the basic principle of church government is that Christ is the Head of His church. He exercises His headship through spiritually mature elders. What are those elders supposed to do?

3. The elders' task is to lead by shepherding God's flock.

The various terms used for church leadership as well as several of the key passages reveal several broad areas in which elders are to serve:

A. Elders should provide leadership by example and servanthood.

(See 1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5.) Elders have charge over the flock and are accountable to the Lord. But they are not to lord it over those allotted to their charge, but to be examples to the flock. Peter reflects the leadership style set forth and modeled by the Lord Jesus, who humbly washed the disciples feet and

instructed them, even on that night, that the leader among them should be as the servant (Luke 22:24-27).

Leaders know from the Word and from experience what healthy spiritual maturity is so that they can guide others in the ways of the Lord. Thus as elders humbly walk with God in their own homes (1 Tim. 3:4-5), they lead the church into maturity by their own example.

There are times, of course, when those who lead by servanthood and example must exercise authority. Paul tells Titus (1:9) that an elder must “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” There are times when certain practices among God’s people must be prohibited and wrong doctrines must be confronted. There are times when church discipline must be carried out. None of these things are easy or pleasant. But servant leadership is not soft leadership. An elder must never be self-willed and use authority for personal power. But he must be strong in leading God’s people in truth, which means confronting error.

B. Elders should shepherd God’s flock.

(Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2.) The word “shepherd” is the same as “pastor.” The work of pastoring is shared by the elders. It is impossible for one man to adequately pastor a church this large. The ministry of pastoring involves doing what a shepherd does for his sheep: He knows them (John 10:14); he leads them (John 10:3-4); he feeds them and guides them into the rich pastures of God’s Word (John 10:9; 1 Thess. 5:12; Titus 1:9; Heb. 13:7); he guards them from wolves (John 10:12; Acts 20:29-30); he seeks the lost and straying sheep and helps heal their wounds by getting them restored to the Lord (John 10:16; Ezek. 34:4-5); he corrects the erring or rebellious (2 Tim. 4:2); he equips the flock for maturity so that they can serve the Lord as He has gifted them (Eph. 4:11-16).

C. Some elders should concentrate on preaching and teaching.

(1 Tim. 5:17-18.) We will cover this in more detail when we get to these verses. But you will notice that Paul distinguishes some elders who labor in word and teaching. Verse 18 makes it clear that such men should be supported financially in their work. It takes

both giftedness and hard work (which means time) to do an adequate job of preaching God's truth. Those who are so gifted should devote themselves to that ministry. In the early church, the apostles were being pressured by the practical needs of the congregation to get involved in administrative matters. But they told the church to select qualified men who could take care of these matters and added, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Sadly, too many pastors in our day allow themselves to get diverted from prayer and the ministry of the Word. The entire church suffers if a few men do not devote themselves to this crucial work.

D. Some elders should concentrate on administration and oversight.

(1 Tim. 5:17.) The deacons, as we will see, can aid the elders in this important task, just as the first deacons in the Jerusalem church relieved the apostles from ministering to the needy. But the elders should lead by overseeing and by equipping those under their oversight for various ministries in the church. Remember, an organism is not the same as an organization, but an organism is highly organized. This means that we can't just adopt business management principles straight into the church. But we do need proper organization, delegation, equipping, and oversight for the local body of Christ to function effectively.

Conclusion

Thus the answer to "who is in charge of the church?" is, Jesus Christ is! He exercises His headship in the local church through elders who are spiritually mature men, selected by God and recognized by the church, who through example and servant-hood shepherd His flock.

Note one final thing: In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says that a man should aspire for and desire the office of overseer. It is a fine work. The word "aspire" means to stretch oneself out or to reach after. This is not ambition for power and status, but a reaching toward spiritual maturity so that you can serve the Chief Shepherd by helping to shepherd His flock. Some of you men should have this desire from God to become elders. To get there, you should be growing in godliness (the qualities of 1 Tim. 3:1-7) by daily time in

His Word and in prayer. You should be shepherding your own family, setting an example in your own home. You should be taking advantage of every opportunity to serve God's people, building caring relationships with others with the goal of seeing them become mature in the faith. In other words, the church should not put a man into the office of elder so that he can serve; it should recognize as elders the men who are already living the life and doing the work. We need men who desire that fine work of oversight in this flock. We cannot grow without it. I pray that some of you will aspire to that work.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practical differences between "church politics" and biblical church government?
2. To what extent do business management principles apply to the local church? Where are there differences?
3. Some churches are heavy on organization and light on organization. Others are the reverse. Where are we?
4. As Americans who love democracy and freedom, we tend to resist submission to authority. Where does democracy conflict or coincide with biblical church government?

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